UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/C.5/49/56
16 February 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Forty-ninth session
FIFTH COMMITTEE
Agenda item 113 (c)

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT: RESPECT FOR THE PRIVILEGES AND IMMUNITIES OF OFFICIALS OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

Stress management

Note by the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 47/226 of 30 April 1993, the General Assembly, in taking note of the comments in the report submitted on the respect for the privileges and immunities of officials of the United Nations and the specialized agencies and related organizations (A/C.5/47/14), requested that further information be provided on how best to assist and rehabilitate staff members dealing with the after-effects of traumatic and stressful security-related experiences. The present note is submitted in response to that request.

2. The occupational stress inherent in the activities of the United Nations system is an issue that can no longer be ignored. Staff of the system are increasingly being asked to confront situations without having developed the appropriate skills to cope with them. There is insufficient awareness of the impact on alertness, performance and judgement and the resulting negative implications in terms of operational mistakes and harmful effects on the health of staff exposed to stress conditions. It is therefore essential that mechanisms providing for adequate planning, training and support for staff working in stressful situations be put in place on a system-wide basis.

3. This issue was discussed during an ad hoc inter-agency security meeting that was held in New York in May 1994, the recommendations of which were subsequently endorsed by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) in October 1994. At the meeting, it was decided that, in view of the link between security incidents and critical-incident stress, the United Nations Security Coordinator should serve as the focal point for developing a strategy to manage

stress. The meeting also decided that there should be a two-tiered strategy for stress management: preventive stress management and critical-incident stress management. The Security Coordinator has been working with the Office of Human Resources Management and with other organizations of the United Nations system to develop this strategy.

II. PREVENTIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT

4. Knowledge is the cornerstone of prevention. Preventive stress management is designed to ensure that a staff member, before travelling on mission or assignment, is fully briefed regarding what to expect. It is also designed to ensure that a staff member returning from mission is fully integrated into his or her regular environment.

5. To meet this requirement the Office of Human Resources Management has recently developed a mission-readiness workshop, in which participants are provided with information about cumulative and critical-incident stress as well as what steps they can take to cope with this stress. It is expected that these workshops will be held regularly on a quarterly basis. In addition, relevant information on stress management, including a video, a multimedia presentation and printed material, is being developed as part of the mission-readiness package.

6. It is still necessary to develop systematic post-mission debriefing, where staff members will be provided with a support network for reintegration and return to their regular routine work assignments. Included in this would be a process of follow-up of staff members who have experienced critical incidents.

III. CRITICAL-INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT

7. A critical incident is an event outside the range of normal human experience that causes extreme distress. Such events are usually sudden, life-threatening or physically or emotionally disturbing. Some examples are:

(a) Witnessing casualties or destruction from either natural or man-made disasters or civil strife;

(b) Serious injury or death of a relative, friend or co-worker;

(c) Being the victim of violent crime.

8. Critical-incident stress is not a medical condition. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal event. The most important action in dealing with critical-incident stress is to provide individuals with a mechanism to defuse the reaction to the experiences they have had. The next step is a more organized debriefing led by a team specially trained in dealing with critical-incident stress. Both interventions should optimally take place within 48 to 72 hours of the event. This procedure has become routine, inter alia, for emergency relief workers such as police, firefighters and emergency medical personnel.

9. To date there have been three instances in which the Security Coordinator was compelled to request the assistance of professional stress counsellors to assist staff members in the aftermath of violent security incidents:

(a) In September 1993, following the death of a senior United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) staff member in Nairobi during a car-jacking incident, a stress counsellor was included as part of the security mission sent to investigate the incident;

(b) In November 1993, following the events in Burundi, a stress counsellor was sent to Bujumbura to counsel those staff and dependants who had been in the area where the incidents took place; and

(c) In April 1994, following the events in Rwanda, a trauma management team of stress counsellors was sent to Nairobi to counsel the evacuees. The team included the UNEP Staff Counsellor, two critical-incident stress experts generously provided to the United Nations by the Government of Canada, two counsellors from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), two locally hired psychologists and a member of the Staff Counsellor's Office in New York who had a critical-incident stress background. A total of 237 United Nations evacuees, including spouses and approximately 60 children, were met by one or more members of the trauma management team. They assisted participants in minimizing the short-term effects of the trauma they had experienced and in moving towards recovery and returning to their lives.

10. The lessons learned from these experiences have been used to develop a critical-incident stress strategy that will be specific to the needs of the United Nations. Inter alia, the intention is:

(a) To train a small number of peer counsellors at high-risk duty stations to provide immediate on-the-scene critical-incident stress defusing, as required;

(b) To train key management personnel at high-risk missions to identify critical-incident stress, to work with local counsellors and to determine when outside expertise is required;

(c) To develop a core of in-house critical-incident stress counsellors who could be called upon for debriefing and, as required, in emergencies;

(d) To develop long-term and adequate support, counselling and treatment for staff suffering from critical-incident stress.

IV. OBSERVATIONS

11. The development of a stress-management programme is a priority. It must be borne in mind, however, that the development and implementation of the Secretariat strategy in this respect will require time and resources. In the meantime the Organization must deal with the psycho-social needs of United Nations staff at any critical moment. The Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator has therefore developed a roster of mental health professionals

trained to conduct critical-incident stress debriefings and who may be called upon as necessary. The support of Member States in the development and implementation of this programme is essential.